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Reasons for Adopting or Revising a Journalism Ethics Code: The Case of Three Ethics Codes in the Netherlands

Melita Poler Kovačič*

Anne-Marie van Putten**

SUMMARY

The authors of this article approached the dilemma of whether or not a universal code of journalism ethics should be drafted based on the existence of factors prompting the need for a new ethics code in a national environment. Semi-structured interviews were performed with the key persons involved in the process of drafting or revising three ethics codes in the Netherlands from 2007 onwards: the Journalism Guideline by the Press Council, the Journalism Code by the Society of Chief-Editors and the Code of Conduct by the Foundation Media Ombudsman. The research showed that while these codes arose from some specific circumstances and needs of Dutch journalism, some of the reasons cannot be described as specifically "Dutch". Particular problems of journalism which triggered the need for a (new) code, such as ethical dilemmas of online journalism and the invasion of a child's privacy, also appear in other countries. However, if a code is to be accepted and respected by journalists, it has to respond to the needs which are perceived as needs in a particular environment, based on a particular problem being identified by journalists and other parts of society. The idea of keeping the codes within the boundaries of societies, cultures and traditions does not contradict the idea of a common journalistic

* Dr. Melita Poler Kovačič, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences (University of Ljubljana), Slovenia. E-mail: melita.poler-kovacic@fdv.uni-lj.si.

** Anne-Marie van Putten, Bachelor of Arts in History (University of Utrecht), Master of Arts in Dutch language and culture (University of Leiden), the Netherlands. E-mail: amevanputten@gmail.com.

ideology, which is to be understood as journalists' common commitment to ethical journalism carried out through journalists' efforts to introduce efficient self-regulation instruments, including ethics codes, on the national level.

Key words: ethics code, journalism ethics, journalism ideology, press council, the Netherlands

Introduction

In journalism studies literature, the existence of an ethics code has been defined as one of the criteria of journalism professionalization (e.g., Splichal & Sparks, 1994; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Parallel to the history of journalism professionalization runs the history of ethics codes (Deuze, 2005: 449), especially since 1954, when the *Declaration on the Principles of the Conduct of Journalists* was adopted by the International Federation of Journalists. This declaration comes closest to the idea of a common journalistic code. Still, a truly universal code of journalism ethics has not yet been introduced, even though the topic continues to be debated in the journalism ethics literature (e.g., Herrscher, 2002; Ward, 2005; Poler Kovačič, 2008).

Several scholars have been searching for presumably common journalistic values. For example, Preston's (2009) findings from in-depth interviews with journalists and editors in 11 countries showed little variation in terms of their key values. Hafez's (2002) comparison of journalism ethics codes from Europe and the Islamic world also pointed to a broad intercultural consensus about the central values of journalism. Based on theoretical (philosophical) reflections, numerous sets of universal values and principles that are relevant to journalism and could apply across cultures have been suggested (e.g., Herrscher, 2002; Perkins, 2002; Strentz, 2002; Callahan, 2003; Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004; Rao & Lee, 2005; Ward, 2005).

However, findings and views are not uniform in this respect. For example, Deuze's (2002, 2008) comparison of surveys among journalists in five countries revealed that journalists speak of similar values, but they apply them in a variety of ways to give meaning to what they do. Weaver (1996) compared results from surveys among journalists in 21 countries and concluded that there seem to be "strong national differences that override any universal professional norms or values of journalism around the world" (Weaver, 1996: 89).¹ Studies showed that "different ethical norms are manifest in the various media systems around the world" (Merrill, 2009: 4).

Studies about differences among national traditions of journalism (e.g., Frost, 2007; Hanusch, 2009; Poler Kovačič, 2009) raise doubts about adopting a universal code of journalism ethics. The dilemma as to whether a universal code should be drafted or not can be approached from different perspectives; in this article, we will focus on the initial phase of the process of adopting (or revising) a code of ethics in a particular national environment, i.e., recognizing the need for a (new) code. By looking into the reasons for drafting an ethics code, we will establish whether decisions to make a code (or revise it) have been linked to specific circumstances and traditions of journalism, media and society. Reasons for adopting (or changing) an ethics code may be seen as an indicator of whether journalism self-regulation has been nationally attuned and responsive to the needs of journalism in a particular country, or has gone beyond national particularities and needs, thus possibly creating more grounds for a universal code of journalism ethics.

To identify the reasons for adopting new codes of journalism ethics or revising the old ones, a case study of Dutch journalism self-regulation will be performed. A method of semi-structured interviews with the key persons involved in the processes of drafting or revising three journalism ethics codes in the Netherlands from 2007 onwards will be used to answer the main research question of this study, i.e., what are the main reasons to adopt or revise a journalism ethics code?

Theoretical Background

Journalism Self-Regulation and Ethics Codes

One of the key criteria for the definition of true professions is the attribute of self-regulation (Splichal & Sparks, 1994: 49). The “asymmetry of expertise” in professions requires the client to trust the professional and the professional to respect both clients and colleagues, and these relations are guaranteed by various institutional forms, including codes of ethics (Abbott, 1988: 5). The official rationale underlying self-regulation is “to assure the highest standards of conduct, protect clients, and contribute to the public welfare” (Rothman, 1984: 187).

Ethics codes are a form of self-regulation. Bertrand (2005: 11) defined an ethics code as a listing of rules which media professionals have discussed and/or agreed upon with, preferably, input by the public, and which should be made known to the public. According to Black et al., a code of ethics “falls somewhere between societal and personal values on the one hand and law on the other” (1993: 7–8); it is not as subjective as personal beliefs, and not as rigid and enforceable as the law. A code

of journalism ethics should normally be conceived by the professionals themselves (Bertrand, 1997: 19).

Nordenstreng (2008/2002: 251) summarized three angles from which journalistic ethics codes may be approached. First, we may look at them positively, as a means of professional education and instruments of consciousness-raising, which is a somewhat naive approach and was typically taken when the first codes were adopted. Second, we may look at them negatively, as mere rhetorical devices, deliberate window dressing and camouflage, or manifestations of hypocrisy, which is a cynical approach, typical of Western countries with a marked discrepancy between the ethical principles and the practice of commercial media. And third, we may take an analytical look and see the codes as a mechanism of self-regulation, as “part and parcel of a broader system of media regulation” (ibid.)

Journalistic Organisations and Ethics Codes in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, three organisations deal with journalism self-regulation on a national level. Two of them – the Raad voor de Journalistiek (Press Council) and the Nederlands Genootschap van Hoofdredacteuren (Society of Chief-Editors) – are fairly established organisations, while the third one – the Stichting Media Ombudsman (Media Ombudsman Foundation) – has been less known in the journalistic field. Until 1995, the *Declaration on the Principles of the Conduct of Journalists* (the so-called *Code of Bordeaux*), adopted by the International Federation of Journalists in 1954 and amended in 1986, was the only journalism ethics code used in the Netherlands. At present, there are three codes, each written by one of the above-mentioned organisations.²

The origins of the current Press Council go back to 1948, when the Dutch Union of Journalists founded the Raad van Tucht. In 1960, this disciplinary council was replaced by the present Press Council. Its main task is to assess complaints concerning journalism behaviour, but it also acts as intermediary between the complainant and the medium or the journalist involved, and makes statements (Stichting Raad voor de Journalistiek, 2001). After a complaint is filed, the parties are heard by a division of the Council, which makes a decision. No damages or fines are imposed, just the request to the media party to publish the decisions afterwards (Koene, 2009: 35–6). At first, the Council did not use a written code of conduct that could function as guidance. Several researchers (Doomen, 1987; Evers, 1987; Ten Hoove, 2003) criticized its inconsistent rulings. In April 2007, the Council adopted an ethics code called the *Journalistieke Leidraad* (*Journalism Guideline*). It was revised in April 2008 and updated in September 2010.

Another professional organisation is the Society of Chief-Editors. It aims to represent common interests, arising from the editorial responsibility of its members, as stipulated in the collective agreement for newspaper reporters and editors (Nederlands Genootschap van Hoofdredacteuren, 2000). It was founded in 1959. At first, it was part of the Dutch Union of Journalists, but over time some conflicts occurred and culminated in 1975, when the Society deleted the Union from their conditions (Wijffjes, 2005). The Society did not have a written code until 1995, when they adopted the *Code voor de Journalistiek* (*Journalism Code*) and thus became the first Dutch organisation to write an ethics code pertaining to journalists. This led to a peculiar situation, as the Society's code – although being the only Dutch code of conduct for journalists – was not acknowledged, used or referred to by the Press Council (Pleijter & Frye, 2007). In April 2008, the Society of Chief-Editors came up with a new *Journalism Code*.

The third organisation, the Media Ombudsman Foundation, was launched in 2006. Its purpose is to stimulate awareness for the maintenance of quality journalism and to determine how the increasing demand for self-regulation in Dutch journalism can be met by doing research. It only makes statements about structural issues concerning journalism ethics, while specific complaints are referred to the Press Council. In March 2008, it adopted a code, named the *Gedragcode* (*Code of Conduct*). According to the Stichting Media Ombudsman Nederland (2008), it is still a draft code, which refers to the *Code of Bordeaux* and the code of the Society of Chief-Editors, supplemented by some internationally accepted standards, such as those of the *New York Times*. The Media Ombudsman Foundation uses the code as a criterion by which to determine whether news media keep within bounds that are socially acceptable.

Methodology

Research Question

The literature on journalism ethics codes so far has focused mostly on general comparisons of codes adopted in different countries (e.g., Jones, 1980; Laitila, 1995; Hafez, 2002; Pöttker & Starck, 2003) or comparisons with regard to a particular field covered by codes, such as journalists' moonlighting (Limor & Himmelboim, 2006), the treatment of images of tragedy and violence (Keith et al., 2006), news leaks (Son, 2002) and freedom of the press (Himmelboim & Limor, 2008). It analysed the codes in individual countries (e.g., Harcup, 2002; Limor & Gabel, 2002; Wilkins & Brennan, 2004; Breit, 2008; Goretti Nassanga, 2008) and discussed views on adopting

a universal code of ethics (e.g., Merrill, 1989; Herrscher, 2002; Ward, 2005; Poler Kovačič, 2008). It dealt with the positive contributions of codes (e.g., Bertrand, 1997) as well as their limitations and deficiencies (e.g., Black & Barney, 1985/86; Merrill, 1986; White, 1995; McManus, 1997). The topics of a blogging ethics code (e.g., Kuhn, 2007; Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007; Cenite et al., 2009) and a separate code for online journalism (e.g., Evers, 2001; Van de Burgt et al., 2008) have also been debated. Some authors discussed the codes' effects on journalistic practice (e.g., Pritchard & Peroni Morgan, 1989; Boeyink, 1994, 1998; Voakes, 1997; Berkowitz & Limor, 2003; Berkowitz et al., 2004; Van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2011a, b).

However, there has been a lack of studies on the process of writing codes of journalism ethics, yet this process is important because it is supposed to embrace professionals' reflection on what journalism is and what role it should play in a society. Based on the assumption that a code has been written by journalists, or at least that its draft has been widely discussed in the journalistic community before being formally adopted, the process reflects journalists' values as well as their understandings of a code's role and its meaning for their everyday practices. The process is usually composed of several phases, such as: recognizing the need to draft a new code or to revise the old one; a research study conducted by individuals or work-groups appointed to develop the idea; discussions on draft versions of the code; presentation of the final version to a journalistic organisation within which it has been made; adoption within the organisation; and presentation to the wider journalistic community and the public.

The initial phase – identifying the reasons for a code – is of particular importance, as it is going to influence the whole process. Further, this phase provides an insight into the state of journalism self-regulation at a given moment as well as the wider media and social situation. And finally, the reasons to adopt or revise an ethics code reveal whether the need for a (new) code has arisen from national-specific circumstances and values, or refers to the (presumably) universal news culture, based on the common foundations of a journalistic profession. Therefore, we pose the following research question: *What are the reasons for adopting or revising a journalism ethics code?*

Method and Data

To answer the research question, an ethnographic method of semi-structured interviews will be used. This method is considered appropriate because it allows a researcher "to develop in-depth accounts of experiences and perceptions with individuals" (Cousin, 2009: 71). Such interviews are structured around a set of themes

which serve as a guide. The questions are pre-formulated, but the answers are open-ended; they can be fully expanded at the discretion of the interviewer and the interviewee (Schensul et al., 1999: 149).

Three national journalism ethics codes from the Netherlands were chosen for this research: the *Journalism Guideline* by the Press Council, the *Journalism Code* by the Society of Chief-Editors, and the *Code of Conduct* by the Foundation Media Ombudsman. The years from (and including) 2007 onwards were taken into account, as during this relatively short time period, codes were written or revised at a fast pace, although there had not seemed to be a pressing need for codes for a long time preceding this (see Figure 1). With regard to the research question, seven members of Dutch journalism organisations were selected for the interviews.

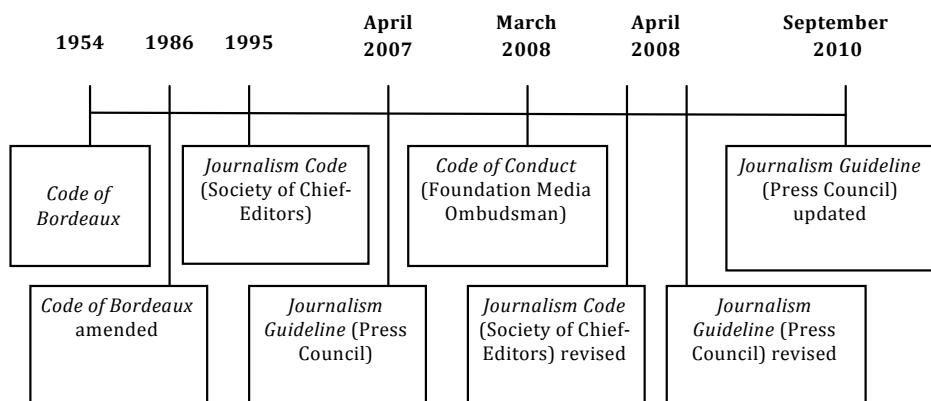


Figure 1 – Timeline of the main ethics codes pertaining to journalists in the Netherlands.

To gather information about the *Journalism Guideline*, three persons were interviewed. Kees Buijs has been working as a journalist since the 1960s and is the author of the *Journalism Guideline*. Daphne Koene has been secretary of the Press Council since 1999; she is the spokesperson of the Council and did the final editing along with Ton Herstel, who was chairman of the Council when the code was written. Henk Blanken and Bart Brouwers were both authors of the code of the Society of Chief-Editors. Blanken initiated the revision of their code from 1995; he had been deputy editor-in-chief of *Het Dagblad van het Noorden* since 2003 and before that he had worked for 16 years for *De Volkskrant*. Brouwers was editor-in-chief of a free newspaper, *Spits*, and worked on the code with Blanken. He also volunteered

to take part in the workgroup of the Press Council's *Journalism Guideline*. Blanken specifically mentioned that he could only speak for himself and not for the Society; that is why, at a later phase of the research, it was decided to consult Arendo Joustra. Joustra, editor-in-chief of *Elsevier*, was chairman of the Society when the code was revised. To find out more about the Media Ombudsman Foundation and its code, Jan van Groesen, a co-founder of the Media Ombudsman Foundation, was interviewed.³ He was an initiator of the Foundation and its code. In the past, he worked as deputy editor at the *General Dutch Press Agency* (ANP).

The interviews were held between December 2010 and May 2011 in Dutch. They were tape-recorded and later transcribed; parts of them were then translated into English.⁴

Results

In the following three subchapters, reasons for writing or revising a code will be presented for each of the three codes. Identification of the reasons will not be explicitly attributed to particular interviewees, except when different interpretations and individual value judgements are involved.

Reasons for Adopting/Revising the Journalism Guideline by the Press Council

For years, the Press Council had no interest in an ethics code at all, as they did not want to restrict the freedom of the press in any way. However, certain problems occurred, which called for changes in this respect. One of them was that the Press Council's members responsible for the verdicts did not have any overview of them. Every week a new chamber was formed, with changing members, and when they had to come to a statement about a complaint, they did not know how similar complaints had been resolved. Sometimes they would remember a similar case, but only exceptionally. The Press Council had been criticized for a long time for the inconsistency of their rulings (Doomen, 1987; Evers, 1987).

The dissertation of Evers (1987) gave them a categorized archive of their verdicts. Subsequently, the Council continued archiving its judgments according to Evers's classification, but they did not do anything with this archive except maintain it. In 2003, another research study (Ten Hoove, 2003) contained criticism of the inconsistency of the Council's rulings. The secretary then started to look for similar verdicts in the archive, so that she could prevent a statement being contrary to a ruling in a similar case made earlier. Even though the different chambers were still allowed

to have divergent views on a specific complaint, all members felt that they had to become more consistent. Looking into the policy of the Press Council before every new session took up quite a bit of the secretary's time. Thus, it became necessary to introduce a system which would make it easier and clearer for the audiences and journalists to find out what the Council considered to be good or bad journalism. It was important that both the audience and journalists knew in advance what the principles of the Council were. This was one of the reasons to start working on a code.

Another reason was that society and politics had begun to call for more transparency in journalism. After the death of politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, a flood of criticism was directed at Dutch journalism. The sentiments of both society and politicians were that journalism principles had to become clearer and that journalists had to act upon them. These criticisms culminated in the desirability of a journalism conduct which journalism itself would supervise.

At this time, several media organisations were working on their own ethical codes, the so-called *stijlboeken* (style guides). National daily newspapers such as *De Volkskrant* (2002) and *NRC Handelsblad* (2000), as well as TV news programs such as *NOVA* (2005) wrote their own style guides. While these media were working with separate codes, the main organisation dealing with journalism practices – the Press Council – did not have one. This argument for creating the Press Council's first ethics code was supported by something the secretary had discovered. In 2005, she started attending meetings of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe, where she discovered that the Dutch Press Council was the only European council giving judgments without a code. This fact alone, however, was not the most important reason for the Press Council to start writing an ethics code. Rather, in line with all the reasons mentioned above, they decided it was time for change. The *Journalism Guideline* was adopted in April 2007.

At least once a year, the Press Council is to assess whether the *Journalism Guideline* needs amending (Raad voor de Journalistiek, 2007/2008/2010). Until now, this has happened twice. Statements made by the Council in 2007 and early 2008 about complaints referring to the Internet and the increase of responses on news websites stimulated the first change. During the annual meeting in April 2008, the Council decided to complement the section on sources and the one on letters and comments on websites, based on the statements made since the *Journalism Guideline* was first introduced. In September 2010, the second revision occurred. There had been a complaint against a journalist, Joep Dohmen (*NRC Handelsblad*), who recorded a telephone interview without asking permission or letting the interviewee know he was recording, although he used it only to write a better piece and did not pub-

lish the recording itself. Based on the Guideline from 2007, he was wrong to have recorded secretly. Some members of the Council had the opinion that it was not necessary to tell someone you are recording them if it is not meant to be published, and the article about recordings was revised. A new article was added to the section about privacy as a result of a discussion which started after a newspaper journalist telephoned the hospitalized nine-year-old Ruben van Assouw, the only survivor of the plane crash in Tripoli.

Reasons for Revising the Journalism Code by the Society of Chief-Editors

The main reason for the new code of the Society of Chief-Editors was their realization that the 1995 version no longer met modern requirements. For instance, privacy on the Internet was not dealt with in the code. Another problem that appeared was the question as to who it was addressed to, as the Internet turned every citizen into a potential publicist. The existent code did not comment on these matters and therefore needed to be changed. Thus, the reasons to revise the *Journalism Code* were primarily due to the rise of the Internet after 1995. During the annual meeting of the Society in 2007, members discussed two options. The first one was to take over the *Journalism Guideline*. The Society members thought that it looked good, but also had a large defect: the words *Internet* and *new media* were not in it. The other alternative was to compose a new code. The members decided that they would revise their code by themselves.

During this meeting, Henk Blanken was an initiator of the new code. The chairman, Arendo Joustra, appointed him to write the new code along with Bart Brouwers, who also volunteered because, as he said, he enjoyed thinking about ethics and responsibilities in journalism. They were helped by a workgroup, also formed at that meeting. Blanken said he had personal motives for writing the code: he felt that the society's trust in journalism was greatly reduced and that journalism needed to do something to restore it. By writing this code, the Chief-Editors would show the society what they stood for. Blanken wanted the audiences to see that the Society was not a closed institution, but a part of society that was more than ready to talk to the public about ethics. For Joustra, this was not the main reason for a revision. For him, the quality of journalism and trust in it are not guaranteed by a code. If the members thought the code needed to be revised, he could do no less than agree, he said. Even though he was not an advocate of journalism ethics codes, he thought it would be good to revise their former code. The process of the profession looking critically at itself was, for Joustra, personally more important than the outcome of the revision. For the Society of Chief-Editors, it was most important that the new

code serve the discussions on journalism ethics. Blanken intended the code to be a starting point for discussions. Journalism had changed due to the Internet and new media, so it was time to rethink their profession. These factors led to the revision of their *Journalism Code*.

Until now, the *Journalism Code* has not been revised again. The Society feels the code is still up-to-date. According to Joustra, a good code is always applicable and does not need revision. Blanken offered a reason why a change could be needed in the near future: if a new law or amendment on source protection is implemented, someone will be responsible for defining who is a journalist, and it is most likely that the government will try to determine it. Blanken, however, does not feel the government should invade journalism in such a way. If it does, he argues, that will be a reason to change the code. Apart from this, the current code is written so generally that the Society is convinced that it will last for a while.

Reasons for Adopting the Code of Conduct by the Foundation Media Ombudsman

When the Foundation Media Ombudsman was founded in 2006, they also wanted to have a code of conduct. They thought that, like all journalism organisations, they should have their own code.

The Foundation's members wanted everyone to see which standards were applied by them. The communication with their audience about who they are and what they stand for was the reason to write and publish a *Code of Conduct*. Transparency is what drove them to write a code, and they also intended to use it as an internal statute.

Since its introduction in 2008, it has not been revised. This code's statements are not based on the results of studies and research the Foundation provides, so it is not likely that their code will change in the future, although it is still called a draft.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this research, we approached the often debated dilemma of whether a universal code of journalism ethics should be adopted or not from the perspective of reasons causing the need for a new ethics code in a national environment. Our selection of perspective was based on the premise that reasons for adopting (or changing) an ethics code in a particular country (in our case – the Netherlands) indicate whether journalism self-regulation in that country has been nationally attuned, i.e., respon-

sive to the needs of journalism in that particular social and cultural context and in line with its traditions, or it has not been linked to national particularities and needs, which may provide some (although not complete) grounds in favour of a common journalism ethics code.

For a long time, Dutch journalists have been opposed to having a code, even though they generally accepted the *Code of Bordeaux*. According to Huub Evers (in Frost, 2007: 283), the journalists' collective view was that codes are too restrictive. Thus, journalism codes in the Netherlands appeared relatively late (Van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2011b: 35) and coincided with the need for more ethical journalism, which became particularly evident in the 1990s, parallel to commercialization of Dutch journalism, which made the media competition for audiences and profits increasingly important. After 1989, when the first commercial broadcasting station was established, it became vital for the media to be the first at bringing a scoop or to have the most viewers/readers (Bakker & De Jongh, 1991). In that decade, the society has criticized the media more and more. The number of complaints submitted to the Press Council grew (Wijffjes, 2005). These were the circumstances under which the first Dutch journalism ethics code on the national level was finally adopted in 1995.

The process of media commercialization in the Netherlands continued and accelerated in the 2000s. Many media felt economic pressures; print media saw circulation decline and television landscape showed signs of fragmentation and rising commercialism (Bakker & Vasterman, 2007: 145). Studies by Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2005, 2006) showed a trend toward the use of certain sensational production techniques in Dutch television news programmes, which had been confronted with increased competition, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. According to Van der Wurff and Schönbach (2011a: 408), the Dutch news media have experienced tremendous changes, among them a decline in newspaper titles and circulation, growing competition, the advent of free newspapers and entertaining news genres and the expansion of online news services.

At the beginning of the 21st century, journalism in the Netherlands came under increasing scrutiny (Van Dalen & Deuze, 2006: 457–8); politicians, policy-makers, scholars and journalists began to publicly criticize the profession and call for better accountability mechanisms. Particular events have occurred that triggered critical discussions about media ethics. For example, after the assassination of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, the debate about the role of the media reached an unprecedented high among politicians, journalists and intellectuals, concentrating on the criticism that the media mixed facts with opinions and personalized the news (Ruigrok, 2005:

153). The discussion about journalism ethics continued and accelerated even further after the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004, with the publication of a photograph showing the just-murdered victim with a knife still in his body. In the weeks after the murder, critics accused journalists of biased coverage (ibid.).

With regard to the circumstances described above, an outburst of new codes or revisions of the old ones in the second half of the 2000s could hardly be described as a surprise. On the contrary, it was a logical step that the profession began to emphasize its self-regulation mechanisms. Many European press councils have been created (or reformed) in response to dissatisfaction with unethical journalism, which has prompted calls for (stricter) legislation (e.g., Tambini et al., 2008: 66–7), and many ethics codes have been created (or revised) in circumstances where criticism towards journalism performance has grown (e.g., Laitila, 1995: 532). By adopting an ethics code, a journalistic community sends the message to both the audience as well as the authorities that ethics is taken seriously and legal measures to protect the audiences' rights are unnecessary. Thus, journalists can avoid the threat of government intrusion after public discontent with the ethics of journalism.

Still, the reasons for each journalistic organisation to write or revise a code were not the same. The Press Council's main objective was to improve the consistency of their ruling. By adopting a code, they responded to the critiques coming from society and politicians, which demanded the transparency of journalism principles and journalists acting upon them. One of the motives was to become more like the other Western European councils, which all had a code. Due to these reasons, the *Journalism Guideline* was adopted in 2007, and until today it has been updated twice. In 2008, the section on sources and the one on letters and comments on websites were changed. In 2010, the articles referring to the secret recording of interviews and privacy were revised. These revisions were stimulated by particular events of the Dutch journalism practice. The Society of Chief-Editors decided to revise their code from 1995 so that the discussion on journalism ethics would be encouraged and their code would be up-to-date again, mainly by including the topic of the Internet and new media. These two factors led to the revision of their *Journalism Code* in 2008. So far, it has not been revised again. The Foundation Media Ombudsman, which adopted a code in 2008, only wanted their code to function as an internal statute and to be a channel for external communication on their position with regards to ethics. They have not revised it yet.

With this study, we demonstrated that adopting or revising journalism ethics codes in the Netherlands from 2007 onwards arose from some specific circumstances and needs, while some of the reasons cannot be described as specifically "Dutch". For

example, stimulating the discussion on ethics is a reason that does not directly refer to any particularities of the Dutch context, but reflects a journalistic organisation's attitude towards ethics, namely its view that ethics is important and needs to be discussed due to the problems in existent journalistic practice. The need to make rulings consistent is a reason that resulted from particular Dutch circumstances, where the Press Council has been passing judgements without written rules – which was unique if compared to other European press councils. By drafting the guidelines, the procedure became clearer both to the complainers and journalists, and the Press Council became more like other councils. We could say that adopting the *Journalism Guideline* solved a specific Dutch problem, but did so in an internationally established way, making the Dutch like everybody else in this matter. Then there are some other reasons, which could be understood as part of the momentary circumstances at first sight, but upon reflection, could be described as both “national” and “international” in nature. For example, there were particular events that raised the need to revise a code, such as the case of unethical reporting on the Tripoli plane crash. The need to update a code by including the Internet and new media was also one of the reasons. Even though these reasons were seemingly connected to particular circumstances and needs, we can, on the other hand, establish that they are not nationally or culturally specific in the sense that they would not also appear in other environments. Ethical dilemmas of online journalism and new media have been seen as a pressing concern in other countries (e.g., Arant & Anderson, 2001; Steele, 2008; Leach, 2009; Ward & Wasserman, 2010), and so has the problem of invading privacy in cases of tragedies involving children (e.g., Libow, 1992; Germer, 1995; Stone, 1999; Hollings, 2005; Mackay, 2008).

These research findings can be seen as supporting the conclusion that since similar ethical problems are reported from different parts of the world, journalists should join forces and draft a common code, encompassing provisions that refer to these same ethical questions. However, the same problems do not necessarily have the same solutions, appropriate for all environments. And if a code is to function well and be accepted by journalists in a particular environment, it has to fulfil their needs by giving them guidance which they feel they can use in their practice.⁵ It is very important that the needs are *perceived as needs* in a particular environment, based *on a particular problem being identified* by journalists and other parts of society. Namely, even if particular problems of journalism prevalently exist in numerous countries, the factual existence of a problem does not automatically ensure that the journalistic community and wider public will identify its existence and perceive the need to solve it. The measures taken to solve a problem (in our case, the codes adopted to set rules about journalists' (un)ethical behaviour and thus protect the public) only have

a chance to be efficient if a need for which they have potential to fulfil is recognized and attributed with importance, both by journalists and the public.

The state of journalism, in which drive for media owners' profits has precedence over the need (and right) of people to be truthfully informed about relevant issues, presents a social problem. Social problems exist when people perceive and have empirical evidence to show that social conditions combine at a local, societal or global level to cause personal problems (Crone, 2011: 2). Part of defining a certain condition as a problem is that people admit that something is wrong and believe that it should be changed. The focus of the debate about arguments in favour of national codes or a common code should move towards the following question: *what can be done in particular countries so that ethical problems of journalism – among which some may even be universal – will be identified and the need to resolve them will be perceived by different parts of the society, demanding to take measures?* Several actors in the society can contribute their share. For example: By performing journalism studies research, academics can uncover unethical practices and explain the damage unethical journalism can do to people. Journalistic professional organisations can raise awareness concerning responsible journalism by introducing several self-regulation mechanisms beside codes; in addition to passing judgements about unethical journalism cases, media councils can also engage in activities aimed at preventing them. Educational organisations can increase media literacy with media education programmes at all levels. Universities can point journalism students' attention to ethical problems, equip them with knowledge about ethics and stimulate understanding of personal responsibility as well as of the potential consequences of poor ethical judgments.

What about the future authors of journalism ethics codes? When drafting a code, they should not avoid research, reflection and discussion among themselves as well as with others in the journalistic community and society. They should keep the particular needs and traditions of their own environment in mind. As Herrscher (2002: 278) wrote: "To be accepted, recognized as valid, and followed (at least sometimes), a journalistic code of ethics must take in consideration the general ideas and concepts of ethics that are actually prevalent within the journalistic world /.../ and the real conditions under which collection and presentation of news takes place in today's newsrooms." The idea of keeping the codes within the boundaries of societies, cultures and traditions does not contradict the idea of a common journalistic ideology, which is to be understood as journalists' *common commitment to ethical journalism*, regardless of their country, culture and traditions, rather than in terms of searching for universal values, let alone a universal code. This universal commitment to journalism ethics should be carried out through journalists' efforts to introduce efficient self-regulation instruments, including ethics codes, on the national level.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The only exception is a near-universal professional norm of protecting confidential sources (Weaver, 1996: 89).
 - ² These three codes apply to the entire journalistic profession in the Netherlands. The internal codes adopted within individual media are not the subject of this research.
 - ³ Another co-founder of the Foundation, Kees Haak, was also selected for an interview, but several attempts to get into contact with him, unfortunately, failed.
 - ⁴ The interviews were performed, transcribed and translated by Anne-Marie van Putten as part of her master's thesis research at the University of Leiden, Faculty of Humanities, titled *Journalism ethics codes: Writing, revising and implementing codes of conduct in Dutch organisations of journalism in 2007–2008*. Her work was guided by Prof. Dr. Jaap de Jong (University of Leiden) and Prof. Dr. Melita Poler Kovačič (University of Ljubljana). For the complete transcriptions of the interviews in Dutch, see Van Putten (2011).
 - ⁵ However, when speaking about the positive potential of a code, such a statement is to be understood in a relative sense. Codified morality has deficiencies and limitations. However, it is, and probably always will be, part of journalistic reality; therefore, it is worthwhile to at least try to make the best of it.
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